China's Media and Public Diplomacy Approach in Africa: Illustrations from South Africa

Yu-Shan Wu

Foreign Policy Programme, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, South Africa; Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Media engagement in Africa serves as a component of China's contemporary public diplomacy drive, which allows for deeper bilateral diplomatic and economic relations. This paper provides the context and impetus that motivated Chinese state media players to provide their own content and point of view since 2009. Whilst public diplomacy is non-specific in that it seeks to achieve a wider enabling environment than specific objectives, it is also oversimplified to employ a singular approach to such a dynamic and changing continent. Rather, the case study of South Africa is used to demonstrate the limits and potential of China's public diplomacy engagement. This paper also highlights the nature of South Africa-China relations and the South African landscape as defining factors that affect the way China to engage meaningfully.

Keywords: public diplomacy; media; China; South Africa; case study

Introduction[1]

China's presence in Africa is the outcome of an ever-evolving engagement, culminated from its own developing foreign policy as well as response to the global and continental dynamics at play. Particularly in the 21st century, China is aware that it cannot disengage from the world's issues and is shedding its low profile status by increasing engagement with developing countries (Kurlantzick, 2007, p.224)

More specifically, since the late 2000's, China is seeking to demonstrate itself as a responsible rising power by showing explicit interest in public diplomacy[2] influencing public attitudes on foreign policy decisions (Bolewski & Rietig, 2008, p.90). There currently exists a range of public diplomacy instruments that have been utilized to shape China's image in Africa, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes abroad, scholarships, and academic and think-tank exchanges. The China economic development narrative also adds to a favourable image amongst African leaders, who are facing their own development crossroads. All such aspects provide a snapshot of China's approach and perspective towards the world.

A recent feature of China's public diplomacy is its media engagement in Africa, necessitated by the information age and the need for active communication; as well as the realization that the China story was being told through the lens of third party voices and who would not take responsibility in portraying China's point of view (Latham, 2009, p.32). Moreover, it is generally recognized that there exists a gap in public perceptions when contrasted with the rapidly increasing economic relations and regular contact between policymakers. In turn, China has utilised its own media platforms in order to engage audiences in strategically important regions.

Still, continental and national dynamics are concurrently unfolding along China's outreach and could potentially impact how its engagements are translated and received; indeed Geldenhuys (2012, p.31) confirms that the pattern of interaction between nations is essentially determined by both identities

This paper will provide insights into China's developing public diplomacy through its media engagement in Africa. Moreover, it will start to shed light on the complexities of translating overarching strategies into context specific situations, in this case South Africa, which raises broader possible factors that affect linear impact. Factors, for example, include the nature of bilateral relations; the *type* of public diplomacy engagement the recipient milieu warrants and lastly, the complex formation of South African perceptions towards China.

South Africa is by no means symbolic of China public diplomacy in Africa, as each country has its own unique socio-historical context and relationship with China. However, South Africa is *one* instance of a complex environment that China is learning to navigate. Whilst China began establishing formal links with the continent since the 1950's, diplomatic relations with South Africa was established in 1998 - after South Africa's political transition from apartheid (and global isolation) to democracy in 1994 and following intense internal debate over the 'two Chinas' question. [3] Still, party-to-party links through China's support for South Africa's liberation struggle – that includes the African National Congress (ANC) and South African communist Party (SACP) - has forged a historical foundation for relations (Alden & Wu, 2014; Le Pere & Shelton, 2007;).

Contemporary relations have deepened over a relatively short period of time that includes forging a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2010 and close diplomatic engagement on multilateral platforms such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) grouping. However, exploring the China-South Africa link also signifies the complex relations *between* developing powers. Despite the progressive high-level links and that South Africa is home to the largest Chinese community in Africa, there remains a lesser degree of public engagement on the relationship as well as occasional criticism on the relationship from South African civil society. There are even paradoxes within South Africa's contemporary media industry. On the one hand, cultural products are usually originated from "an imperialistic global media industry"; on the other hand, South African media spreads the cultural contents from countries outside of Africa to their own country (Teer-Tomaselli, Wasserman and & De Beer, 2007, pp. 136). Moreover, domestic inequality exists in access and production of media flows (Teer-Tomaselli et al., 2007).

Against this backdrop, the present paper explores the complexities and possibilities of China's media public diplomacy in South Africa. It is demonstrated that seeking to influence target audiences is a haphazard process that is determined by a range of engagements, and exists in parallel to domestic-driven factors and circumstances.

China's media engagement in Africa: from infrastructure to public diplomacy
Media engagement
A country's outreach, set by its national interests, communicates a reflection of their intentions and own internal circumstances. This is true for China's early media engagement in Africa. Following the 1955 Bandung Conference between Asian and African countries, China's media links (1950's-70's) supported its ambitions to establish diplomatic relations with newly independent African states and garner ideological support from Africa under the context of the Cold War (Wu, 2012, p.11). While in the 1980's-1990's, China sought to repair its international image, reinforce its formal political ties and engage important regions in the world as it opened to the world (Wu, 2012, p.11).

As relations evolved, so has the nature of China's media engagement on the continent to include an increasingly multifaceted approach. The progression of China media engagement on the continent can be witnessed along the formalized platform of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). [4] Between the official launch of the forum in 2000 and the second in 2006, there was a wide range of media engagements that focused

predominantly on media infrastructure (for example in 2000, Xinhua provided satellite equipment for a television station in Uganda; in 2004 China assisted Gabon in building its national broadcast station) (Wu, 2012, pp.13-15).

By the 2006 FOCAC Beijing Summit, the China-Africa relationship significantly expanded as high-level exchanges which included Africa tours by the Chinese Foreign Minister, Premier and President (Zheng, 2010, pp.273). Beijing also published the *China's African Policy* document on China's role in Africa, where media co-operation was explicitly outlined:

> China wishes to encourage multi-tiered and multi-formed exchanges and cooperation between the media on both sides, so as to enhance mutual understanding and enable objective and balanced media coverage of each other. It will facilitate the communication and contacts between relevant government departments for the purpose of sharing experiences on ways to handle the relations with media both domestic and foreign, and guiding and facilitating media exchanges (Zhu, 2006)

As a result, China's media engagement incorporated a range of exchanges with African journalists such as the Sino-African Cooperation Forum (SACF) in 2006.In the same year, the Third Workshop for African Journalists was held in Beijing, where 42 journalists learned about China and its Africa policy - as well as visited Chinese media outlets (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2006). These exchanges emphasize respective journalism approaches and media philosophies, apart from infrastructural support.

Three years later, at the 2009 FOCAC Summit held in Sharm el Sheikh (Egypt), both previously mentioned media engagements were formalized by the pledge to involve Chinese communication enterprises in building African communication infrastructure, as well as reinforcing exchanges between officials and media workers (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2009). An example was highlighted during a discussion with a former secretary-general of the South African National Editor's Forum (2014) on the exchange between South African and Chinese journalists. The latter group visited South Africa in 2008; and the following year, the South African's (along with other African senior writers) were invited to visit China in 2009.

By 2012, media relations reaffirmed the importance of people-to-people contact on the agenda. For instance, during FOCAC V (2012), Beijing proposed a 'China-Africa Press Exchange Centre' in recognition that few journalists based in China are of African origin (Alden, 2012). A representative from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012) had stated, during a seminar at the China Foreign Affairs University, that the intention was to establish a centre where African journalists could stay, observe and report on China. Similarly during a 2013 seminar on China-Africa Media Cooperation in Kenya, the Chinese ambassador (Liu, 2013) reiterated a warm welcome to African media setting up offices in China.

Increased interest in content provision and foreign public engagement
Parallel to the formalised China-Africa media links is China's wider interest in public diplomacy. For Joseph Nye, successful public diplomacy is synonymous with soft power, the ability to obtain outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2008). Both concepts recognise the successful influence of publics begin with the communication of values, culture and ideology (Snow, 2009, p.3).

China's interest in institutionalising soft influence through media has been necessitated by response to a culmination of national and global developments.

On a domestic level, Sun (2010, p. 58) points to the experience of the 2008 Beijing Olympics as precipitating the need to consolidate diverging domestic and global perspectives on China. China sought to use its hosting of the Olympics – and the worldwide attention – to

portray its positive rise (Budabin, 2011, p. 140). Yet concurrently, and much to Beijing's surprise, foreign activists used the maximized media attention on China to criticize its links with Sudan and its passive stance on the Darfur crisis since it had begun in 2004. One example was Mia Farrow's 2007 opinion piece titled 'Genocide Olympics', published in the Wall Street Journal. Media headlines also pointed to China's internal ethnic tensions at the time (Ding, 2008, p. 294).

More specifically is the concern over prevailing 'China in Africa' narratives told by third party newsmakers characterising China's engagement as "grabbing land, extracting resources and neo-colonialism [force] in Africa" (Chen, 2013). This further necessitated the need to respond to such criticism and address possible cultural differences and miscommunication points that could further impact relations.

While the importance of mind over force has historically featured in Chinese political culture[5], the global information age has altered the conditions of influence. Power is increasingly intangible and the role of media (and communication technologies) in public diplomacy is increasingly acute (Nye, 2002). A simple broadcast can reach across geographical barriers, into the most intimate physical spaces of the audience. Media are not only easing the job of public diplomacy, but have also become globally recognised as influential institutions as well. Moreover, if information is power, then the world's population is increasingly accessing that power (Nye, 2008, p. 99).

Indeed public communication for the interest of foreign policy is not unique to China. While there is a long history of public diplomacy through media dating as far back as the 1930's (as is the case of the British Empire Service), 21st century public diplomacy is a salient political communication issue, seemingly due to the context of September 11, 2001. In an increasingly globalised world, previously side-lined countries are also taking interest in media and public diplomacy. For instance, the international news media's inaccurate reports on France's policy initiatives prompted the French government to start its own 24-hour news service (Olander, 2010). In December 2006, France24 was launched to convey French values and perspectives in French, English and Arabic. Other governments have also made inroads in the global news market. For example, Iran's international English news channel, Russia Today (RT), Euronews (a consortium of public service broadcasters) and La Nueva Televisora del Sur (teleSUR), a media outlet based in Venezuela with some Latin American governments' support. Last but not least is the Qatar-based Al Jazeera, a symbol of the Middle East's rise and a leading contender to major news services. In contrast to the financial difficulties that traditional news players have faced since the 2008 economic crisis; and in turn curbing their activities - such as the 2013 closure of the Greek broadcaster, Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT), whose three TV channels and radio stations, helped link and inform the global Greek diaspora. These developments became so prevalent that Hillary Clinton remarked that the new diplomatic battlefront is the progressively "crowded field of state-financed satellite television news", in recognition that much of the US media drive was dominated by commercial imperatives (Massey, 2011), resonating that global politics is also based on a contest over credibility.

Against this backdrop, at the 50th anniversary of the establishment of China Central Television (CCTV) in December 2008, the propaganda chief of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Li Changchun, made note that Chinese media should strengthen their communication capacity internally and globally (Sun, 2010, p. 54). China thus sent its state media players - CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International (CRI) and China Daily - abroad in 2009 to provide its own perspective on China and the world. By 2011, it was stated that Chinese media who targeted overseas audiences would receive more investments (over the next decade), in order to 'present a true picture of China to the World' (China Daily, 2011).

The heightened interest in providing China's view via content and programming, as well as the establishment of local bureaus, was extended to the African continent. 2012 was the point at which China's media presence in Africa became most visible. For example, during January 2012, CCTV Africa's broadcast centre was launched in Kenya (a base where other international news players are present) with the intent to provide African focussed news and perspectives (http://cctv.cntv.cn/lm/cctvafrica/01/index.shtml).

As noted by CCTV's president, Mr Liang Xia Tao, the purpose in Nairobi is to expand 'English and Chinese broadcasts with footage from the continent to China, Africa and the rest of the world' (Burning Splint, 2011). The centre also complements networks in other central locations in London, Washington DC, and Moscow that together add to a wider China narrative in the world. Moreover in December 2012, the China Daily Africa edition was launched; a weekly paper that publishes on China-Africa ties (with a different theme each edition) as well as contributions from Chinese, African and international commentators.

By hiring and including views of local journalists and personalities as well as international commentary, these media players are adopting subtle strategies commonly practised by global media players. Such drives express China's interest in competing as a global news player. In fact, during October 2013, CCTV hosted a forum with its partners to discuss promoting its brand and competitiveness in the world (Wang, 2013). There also appears to be recognition of global communication trends and the imperative of 'communicating with' versus 'broadcasting to', for example CCTV Africa established its own Twitter account (@cctvnewsafrica).

From the Global to the Local Level: the South African case
What the China media drive in Africa reveals is interest in utilizing media instruments as strategic communication tools. However the use of global news media to achieve public diplomacy objectives, also suggests the blurred boundary between what constitutes government and commercial imperatives – as both are seeking audience attention for respective reasons.

The trend of government interest in reaching out to publics raises important questions. 'Soft' influence is traditionally perceived as reliant on the inherent attractiveness of people and culture. Nevertheless, while increased government motivation and capital can bring dispersed publics closer, they can only act as catalysts (Wu & Alden, 2014). Rather, there are parallel trends and intervening factors that affect how communication is translated at a country-specific level. Therefore, by exploring the South African case, it becomes apparent that China's media and overall engagement is more nuanced than monolithic.

Context: The China-South Africa Relationship
Since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has remained the ruling party in South Africa to present, allowing relations to progressively deepen, albeit to varying degrees across each presidency (Sparks, 2011, p. 14; Alden & Wu, 2014, pp. 8-9). The relationship is considered unique when considering its range, like willingness to cooperate at a continental level (like socio-economic development and peace and security issues) and the coordination of positions on multilateral platforms (specifically the UN Security Council, FOCAC, BRICS, G20 and generally pushing for a more equal international political and economic structure) (Alden & Wu, 2014, p. 15). South Africa is also the African co-chair of FOCAC (2012-2018) and hosted the FOCAC VI summit in December 2015.

Two-way trade has also steadily risen to a point where China has consecutively remained South Africa's largest trade partner since 2009 (Tian, 2013, p. 7). While there have been concerns over the trade imbalance between South Africa and its primary trade partners (such as China), South Africa is also one of China's main foreign direct investment (FDI)

recipients. This suggests that China's investments do not only target resource driven African economies but diversified economies as well (Carike, Elsabe & Henri, 2012, p.11589). At the same time South African firms have enjoyed a degree of success in China and are a regional force to reckon with, playing in direct competition with Chinese investments on the continent (Alden & Wu, 2014, p. 18). Apart from the burgeoning diplomatic and economic links is the less uniform interaction at the public level; what Park and Alden (2013) describe as the 'downstairs' element in South Africa – this includes the largest (and mixed) population of Chinese migration on the continent, strong labour unions and a vocal civil society.

The direction of this relationship (and influence on China's approach) is impacted by the very fact that South Africa is characterised as a 'mature' market with relatively established institutional structures and laws that are strict towards foreign investment (Alden & Wu, 2014, p. 18). Moreover, the South African media environment is itself complex. Apart from the occasional development that has negatively impacted freedom of expression, media and information is generally diverse – in terms of numbers of newspaper, radio and community television stations; close to 100% mobile subscribers and rising Internet users (African Media Barometer, 2013, p. 10). Still, domestic media flows as well as the nature and structure of South African media appears to perpetuate national inequalities (Teer-Tomaselli et al., 2007, p. 137). Thus, China's media engagements and wider public diplomacy interests could also be affected by such a complex landscape.

Unravelling a complex media engagement
China's media presence in South Africa appears to serve multiple purposes ranging from public diplomacy instruments (as noted previously) to companies providing products and services to entities seeking investments (see Table 1 Illustrating examples of China Media engagements in the South Africa, 2013-2014).

The general presence of China's media houses responsible for public diplomacy is not as prevalent to the South African public eye as one might think. In reality, the CCTV channels (CCTV-4 the Chinese language channel and CCTV News, where CCTV Africa is broadcasted) are accessible through subscription to the Digital Satellite Television (DStv) service – South Africa's primary Satellite TV service provider (Gorfinkel, Joffe, Van Staden & Wu, 2014, p.84). However, due to the cost of subscriptions (for example DSTV's Premium service of 130 channels costs about US\$ 64 a month) it means that the main viewers are from upper-income households and even then, access does not equate to viewership of all the channels (Gorfinkel et al., 2014, p.84). Meanwhile, China Daily disseminated information in 2013, on its Africa weekly edition's print and distribution operations where it was revealed that 5,300 of the total 20,000 are distributed in South Africa. Still, distribution has yet to be publicly accessible, noting the dissemination of the weekly is targeted towards embassies, think tanks, universities, financial institutions and international organizations.

According to discussions with a South African journalist in 2012, such media players are likely aware of their limited presence in South Africa as they have actively opted to establish their bases in other strategic locations like Kenya, where other global media players' and institutions' (such as the United Nations Africa headquarters) head offices are located. For instance, CCTV Africa's broadcast centre was set-up in Nairobi, Kenya in early 2012 and China Daily's Africa edition launched in Kenya as well in November 2012. Instead, Chinese media in South Africa appear to be represented through bureaus that feed into larger programing (i.e. CCTV Africa receives content from its bureau in South Africa) rather than run their own dedicated programming. Moreover, there are differences between Chinese media that operate for English speaking and global audiences (like China Daily or CCTV News channel); the Chinese media representatives (like People's Daily or Xinhua) who are present to report back to audiences in China or the newspapers that serve the local Chinese

Table 1. *Illustrating examples of China Media engagements in South Africa (2013-2014)*

Type of Engagement	Chinese media Entity	Summary
Investment	StarTimes	The struggling South African pay-tv operator (owned by the local On Digital Media), TopTV, underwent a business rescue plan due to financial difficulties. As a result the Chinese broadcaster StarTimes acquired a 20% stake (the maximum percentage permissible under South African broadcasting laws) in TopTV, now rebranded as Starsat. The transaction provides the Chinese company a foothold into one of Africa's most sophisticated pay-tv markets
Content	China Daily	The drive to provide content on the China-Africa relationship and perspectives is extended to the South African public on 28 June 2013. China Daily Africa edition is believed to use the same distribution networks as the Financial Times (who announced they will stop their local print-run in South Africa). It will print about 5000 copies for the South African market.
Investment and cooperation	Unknown Chinese consortium	The Sekunjalo Consortium purchased Independent News and Media (the largest owner of South Africa's English-language newspapers) - from Irish majority shareholding. It is said a Chinese Consortium has part funded the purchase. Moreover there is possibility of a further investment of 20% by the Chinese Consortium to ensure there is enough capital to reinvigorate existing newspaper titles, for a digital strategy and an African growth strategy. There was speculation of ownership by CCTV, CADFUND and/or China Development Bank – but still no official announcement has been made. In December 2014 - during South African President Jacob Zuma's state visit to China – it was reported that CCTV and Independent Media signed a partnership agreement to create a new media platform for the continent, in order to showcase Africa's development.
Products/ Services and Technology	Huawei	Huawei launches its Africa-only smartphone and its flagship smartphone the P6 to compete with Samsung and Apple. The company also started providing services to mobile customers by launching its first call centre in South Africa, signalling its focus on local customers. The company also operates as a commercial partner, collaborating with mobile and fixed-line operators as well as establishing South Africa's first telecoms Research and Development centre.
Products/ Services	Tencent	Tencent China's largest Internet company (with the support of its 35% stakeholder and South African grown, Naspers) launches WeChat in South Africa. WeChat, described as a mobile social communications application and not a social network; and was launched with TV commercials featuring international football star Lionel Messi and advertised over radio advertisements and through competitions on radio stations.

community (like the African Times). It is also unknown whether such Chinese media players actually interact or share similar objectives. Thus, success of a media player is also relative to the role their employees perceive they are playing.

Another factor that affects China driven content in South Africa is the fact that the media market is already established and highly challenging for new entrants. There are four main media groups that already dominate the local media industry - they are (Lloyd, 2013, p. 16):

- Nasionale Pers – widely known as Naspers;

- Independent News and Media (previously owned by the Irish Independent Group and sold to the local Sekunjalo Investment Group who renamed the company, Independent Media, in 2013);
- Caxton and CTP Publishers and Printers; and lastly
- Avusa/Times Media Group.

As a result, it is a very difficult market to penetrate. There have been attempts to challenge the concentration in media ownership, such as the Nigerian owned daily newspaper, *This Day*, that tried to target South African businessmen and policymakers; but the paper lasted a year before closing (Llloyd, 2013, p. 16). Still, South Africa's media landscape is also changing. De Wet (2013) notes that the new owners of the Independent Group (that is partly owned by trade-union investment vehicles, a broad-based empowerment groups, as well as undefined Chinese investment) signal a slight shift from the predominantly 'critical of government' position of the four major media groups.

The South African media market can also be described as a relatively liberal news market (Xin, 2009, p. 374), necessitating commercial versus official engagement in order to gain audience attention. Already the DSTV platform (also available to subscribers across sub-Saharan Africa) is home to a range of competing news channels including CCTV, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and South African outlets (like eNews Africa Channel/ENCA and SABC News24). Moreover, these channels are increasingly including programming that deals with the African point of view such as BBC's *Focus on Africa*, CNN's *African Voices* and Al Jazeera's *Africa Investigates*. Thus, the African perspective is no longer lacking its own voice, it is *whose* narrative that becomes the narrative of choice that matters.

Such a market seems to be favourable towards players who set trends (CNN is notable for starting the 24-hour news trend and Al Jazeera for incorporating citizen reporting via social media), than reacting to negative publicity. However, it is the rapid uptake of communications technology and thus a levelling playing field between users and agenda setters that requires not only 'broadcasting to' audiences, but also 'speaking with' audiences. In South Africa, newspaper sales are decreasing but other platforms have increased audiences over time, particularly radio and TV channels (Lloyd, 2013, p. 15). While Internet and communication technologies usage remains at its developing phases in South Africa, the increasing low cost of communication technology could translate to future potential (Wu, 2013a). This was reflected by the *Financial Times'* business decision to stop its print run in South Africa and instead focuses on a model driven by new technology; recognising the short term cost effectiveness of doing so and foreseeing the eventual migration of consumers to digital forms (Southey, 2013; Vecchiatto, 2013). This means Chinese media engagements will need to include their voices across different media platforms in order to shape the narrative on China-Africa.

Overall China is engaging in a complex South African landscape, whose media platforms are diversified but the number of influential players are not.

A caveat for public diplomacy should be raised here. It is unclear whether publics of a targeted country necessarily distinguish between a state's intended communication and their interaction with other entities from (but not necessarily related to) that state. Public diplomacy is not only derived from orchestrated drives (i.e. state media) – nor is it merely propaganda - but is also informed by the un-orchestrated (private and non-government) engagements (Servaes, 2012, p. 643; Nye, 2008, p. 101). Moreover, it is possible that state interests also interlink with commercial drives and vice versa. In other words, the process of informing perceptions is not the result of a singular engagement but rather a culmination of a set of engagements.

For Joshua Kurlantzick (2006, p. 1), China and emerging players have indeed articulated a broader idea of soft power because their attractiveness further includes investment, development aid and business. In particular, nations who desire China's aid, trade, and recognition are also relatively susceptible to its influence. In addition, a study by Jura and Kaluzynska (2013) found that the image of China as a potential investor was an attractive feature.

If 2012 was the year of launching China's point of view across Africa, it seems 2013 (as reflected in South Africa) was the year of media investments and targeting consumers. For example, Chinese players have attempted to counter the challenging South African media landscape by:

- Entering into joint ventures (such as the social media app, WeChat, driven by South Africa's Naspers but owned by China's Tencent)
- By acquiring stakes in South African companies (such as the StarTimes' stake in TopTV/Starsat; and the Sekunjalo Consortium purchase of Independent News and Media)
- Engage South African as consumers/partners (i.e. Huawei selling of mobile handsets and assisting on telecommunications infrastructure).

A general approach for China entering the competitive South African market is to partner with local entities as is the case in the media market where partnerships exist with two strong local media players (i.e. Naspers and Independent Media; Alden & Wu, 2014, p. 24). Overall, it appears China tends to take a commercial route in its media engagement in South Africa.

It would be overly general to believe that media acquisitions and services share the same objectives as China's public diplomacy drive through media. Still commercial media drives contribute to public experiences and engagement with national brands and thus echo Kurlantzick's view that economy can play as soft influence. Subtle commercial engagements are successful in that they appear independent from government drives, which have clear national interest concerns.

The commercial and subtle public diplomacy drives are fluid and can both help achieve specific objectives by creating favourable environments (Fijałkowski, 2011, p. 224). They could also counteract each other. Favourable views towards China due to its commercial edge in general are still increasing. In line with this perspective, trade still dominates China's economic engagement in South Africa, while actual investment remains modest (Sandrey, 2013, p. 3). China is indeed investing in such a diversified economy; still, its actual investments remain undiversified (Carike, Elsabe & Bezuidenhout, 2012, p.11595). Perhaps more recent investment announcements that includes media and property (such as Zendai Property Group) signal for more things to come. The specific case of StarTimes' rescuing South Africa's TopTV (DSTV's only competitor) is an example of an attempt to attract middle-income South Africans and the possible provision of more Chinese programming (Gorfinkel, 2014, p. 85).

While the scope of the paper does not allow for deeper analysis of China's telecommunications engagement on the continent, such engagements have potential in providing subtle communication of China's intentions and image.[6] The very fact that China is willing to transfer technology and assist in building the continents media and communication access, plays interesting contrast to allegations that China is opposed to African media freedom (by providing technology that restricts media access) (Gagliardone, 2012; Wu, 2012, p. 18).

The exploration of China's media engagements in South Africa reveal that China's communication interests span beyond public diplomacy. Yet, together, these engagements also in effect communicate something about China.

Indeed, South Africa and China's competition and collaboration permeates into the continent. On one-hand, players from the respective countries are seeking consumers for their pay-TV service providers (China's Startimes and South Africa's DStv). Moreover, the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) *Channel Africa*, an international radio station, has itself been communicating South Africa's own foreign policy since 1994[7]. On the other-hand is possible cooperation. During December 2014 was the announcement of an agreement signed between South Africa's Independent News and Media and China's CCTV (Mkhwanazi, 2014). The partnership is said to include the establishment of a new channel where the continent's "people would tell their own stories" (Mkhwanazi, 2014). Such a collaboration raises questions, as most media-public diplomacy initiatives have been driven by single countries. Moreover, whether the partnership is able to support both South Africa and China's interests and outlooks is uncertain.

The perceptions factor

Another factor beyond market acceptance is the issue of overlapping interests (such as government and civil society relations) and perceptions that affect how China's initiatives are received. The media are only one part of several contact points that are informing perceptions. When television sets and mobile phones are switched off, physical contact between Chinese and Africans will come into play.

In general, there are three main African perspectives on China in Africa; they can be broadly categorised into (Rebol, 2010):

- Friendship and mutual benefit emphasized by government officials.
- The welcoming of new economic opportunities (through Chinese investment and trade).
- Emphasis on the environmental, social and economic impacts of Chinese influence by civil society (including the general public and trade unions).

Perceptions will remain varied and complex as those who view China-Africa relations positively are also likely to experience points of tensions in their relationship with China, and vice versa (Sautman & Hairong, 2009, p. 729). There are also determinants such as background, demographics, place in society and the nature of the issue. These nuances begin to establish not just what individuals think but also why they think the way they do. In the case of South Africa, it appears that South African public understanding of the complexities of China are still limited, perceptions appear largely driven by "emotion" and "selectivity" (i.e. economic issues) (Wu, 2013, pp. 16-17). Moreover, Fritz (2009) highlights the role of South Africa's vocal and diverse civil society and its close links with neighbouring civil society groups, in particular, with regards to the speedy campaign against a Chinese ship carrying arms heading for the Zimbabwean Defence Force in 2008. Importantly, Africa's growing and vibrant civil society could potentially challenge formal representations of China-Africa relations as 'win-win' (French, 2014).

A further insight into some local perceptions was revealed in March 2014 when the South Africa and China education ministries signed an implementation plan following a collaboration agreement signed during President Xi Jinping's visit to South Africa the previous year. The agreement, at a policy and institutional level, aimed for collaboration in areas like science and technology and mathematics (South Africa Basic Education Department, 2014). Moreover, it included the introduction of the Chinese language in selected South African schools, extending access beyond the Confucius Institutes (that are

generally aimed at university level). Following this announcement was a public discussion on a South African commercial talk radio station, *Power FM,* on 4 March 2014. The caller comments raised the concern of prioritising Chinese language over development of local languages (and some concerns about the department's basic education's general priorities); raised questions over China's *real* intentions and even whether the learning of Chinese is reciprocated by China by encouraging the learning of African local languages. At the same time, a basic education department representative reiterated that Chinese classes would not be compulsory but optional in selected schools. One South African parent, who called to inform her children who went to a local Chinese school, was even asked to comment on China's strict education system - indicating that there are wider concerns of cultural difference beyond language considerations. This case reiterates some disconnections between government-motivated initiatives and public understanding behind these initiatives.

Moreover, the close and frequent collaboration between policymakers on both sides – and lack of public communication - means there is risk of the perception that China's position is one that is synonymous with government. This was evident during the Sekunjalo Independent Media consortium purchase of Independent News and Media. Described as a 'private and commercial transaction', there is nevertheless 25% ownership by the ruling African National Congress and 20% by 'Chinese state instruments' (with little public knowledge on who these entities are) that have raised alarm and speculation on what the government related ownership means for the independence of local media (Trewhela, 2014). Indeed, such a purchase of one of the country's largest media players' awakened deep emotional sentiments, noting the relatively recent experience of apartheid censorship that has made South Africans extremely sensitive to any infringement of their rights to freedom of expression (Lloyd, 2013, p. 22).

Apart from investigation into China's role in such a purchase, there are also broader criticisms to the perceived non-transparency of South Africa's leadership. This includes the debates over the Protection of the State Information Bill (first introduced in 2010) that proposed the classification of official documents and thus threatening public rights to access information (http://www.r2k.org.za/secrecy-bill/). It is also worth noting the allegations of government's close-knit ties with the wealthy Gupta family (who migrated to South Africa from India in 1993). For example was public concern over the Gupta-owned newspaper, *The New Age*, that is perceived to report favourably on government; at the same time, is reported government spending on advertising in the paper and provision of financial support towards the paper's 'business breakfast briefings' (Ngalwa, Matlala & Shoba, 2013).

Apart from the perceived close relations at the elite level is the previously mentioned economic focus and interest in the China-South Africa relationship. For instance, a 2013 public opinions survey showed that respondent opted China (53%) as the country that should be South Africa's largest trading partner, ahead of other partners such as the EU or the US (Smith & Van der Westhuizen, 2013). Indeed, as reflected by interviews with South African stakeholders during 2014, there is increasing awareness of global economic and political dynamics and the need to engage China pragmatically, as both partner and market – suggesting that there is a conscious reaching out towards China as there is towards South Africa. This is also apparent when taking note that South Africa's engagement and presence in China is predominantly of an investment nature – and not of a public diplomacy slant. For instance the South African President, Jacob Zuma's, first official visit to Beijing (in 2010) was accompanied by over 300 business representatives. Thereby the elite relationship with wider social contexts reveals some of the micro-dynamics involved in China's current and developing relations with the continent (Large, 2008, p. 60).

The traditional notions of soft influence such as values, culture and people are still somewhat lacking in the relationship. Such limited mutual understanding can potentially

affect other aspects of relations, like trade, as reflected by Chinese firms who have commented that the perception of their products as inferior quality has been a defining challenge in the South African market (Alden & Wu, 2014, p. 33).

Albeit both governments have started to reach out more actively to respective populations (e.g., having launched initiatives like a range of events dubbed the 'South Africa Year in China' in April 2014 [only the second country after Russia] and a 'China Year in South Africa' in 2015), the Chinese embassy in South Africa (2015) stated that China's activities in South Africa would include exchanges by musicians, exhibitions and think tank. Yet, like the Confucius Institutes in Africa that are still learning to operate in different local environments, these initiatives are fairly recent and are at a developing phase (Toh, 2013). Moreover such public diplomacy and media drives are yet to take into account the fact that South Africa's peri-urban and rural populations' access to information have been impacted by the apartheid legacy; and the general commercial tendencies of South Africa's media market predominantly services elite and narrow interests (African Media Barometer, 2013, p. 10). At the same time, the country year events are viewed with a specific purpose of raising respective country profiles and strengthening existing bilateral ties (Graham, 2015). This suggests that stakeholders who directly impact China-South Africa relations are targeted in order to build trust; rather than a 'public' campaign aimed at engaging the wider population of overlapping cultures, languages and interests.

Perhaps another defining factor is time, as noted, more favourable reporting on China and the FOCAC process is a direct result of direct access to official sources (Finlay, 2013, p. 157). Such government drives have been identified as important means of establishing initial links but it is a complex process to catalyse relations beyond policy circles. What remain untapped are spaces where meaning and understanding of the relationship are actively negotiated, such as public driven spaces. [8] There is potential in spaces like the CCTV Africa broadcast hub where Chinese and African reporters' daily livelihoods are tied to a mutual cause and where they negotiate the work environment on a daily basis. The large but diverse Chinese diaspora in South Africa (350,000 as of 2012) also provides opportunity for deeper interaction, albeit the levels of closeness to China and assimilation to the local environment remain mixed (Park & Alden, 2013). It is the physical spaces where relations (based on individuals than a mythical national entity) and public diplomacy (based on finding common ground or values than mere reactive response) develop beyond pragmatic interest.

Conclusion

China has sent its state media on a global drive to advance its influence in the world, signalling its outward engagements that previously focused on trade, investment and diplomatic activities. In particular, China's media engagement in Africa provides insight into China's larger public diplomacy strategy.

However, the question remains whether China's media is making the impact intended. Beijing has only recently adopted its soft influence policies and institutionalized them in the form of global media agencies. As it continues on this path, Beijing will be faced with implications from trends rising globally and on the continent – but more specifically in this paper, are the individual country contexts that drive the direction of China-Africa interface. Such an example highlighted is the case of South Africa.

Illustrations from South Africa reinforce the idea that public diplomacy instruments (like media) - viewed as creating enabling environment for business or political deals - are also impacted by the very engagements they claim to enhance. Beyond public communication as intended engagements are also messages translated through the unintended avenues. This is because the South African media market is both relatively competitive and established,

thus affecting how China is able to engage in such a market (such as requiring a more nuanced-commercial edge).

The local factor also necessitates thinking about the complex role of perceptions that transcends specific engagements and draws on multiple interaction points. China's public diplomacy is affected by the fact that its engagements are porous and mutually affect one another. Moreover, it is important to note that attractiveness is a difficult trait to measure and thus perceived as subjective. Therefore, the issue of perceptions prompts deeper thinking about the context that affects soft influence, moving from *what* publics think to *why* they think of China in certain ways.

Such a localised standpoint stands in complex contrast to the overarching and seemingly uniform China media engagement at the FOCAC level where less is known about private interests and the local potential to affect public diplomacy engagements. Such complexities reveal the need to translate varied communication across different landscapes – requiring unique combinations of government drive, practical engagement, creativity from society and the natural course of time.

Lastly, this paper reinforces the idea that China and (each of its individual) Africa relations are not isolated phenomenon but exist in parallel with other trends (or intervening factors). If we were to solely seek the good, we would find it; and if we were to seek the bad we would find it too. What needs to be understood further then, is how one unique trend or relationship stands in relation to others.

Note on contributor
Yu-Shan Wu is a researcher in the Foreign Policy Programme at the South African Institute of international Affairs (SAIIA) and a doctoral candidate at the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria. Her research focus is on China-Africa issues, in particular China's public diplomacy in Africa and China-South Africa relations.

Notes
1. The author would like to sincerely thank the reviewers and editors for providing valuable advice in the process of producing this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 3rd Meeting of the China Africa Think Tank Forum in Beijing (2013) and has subsequently been updated.
2. According to the Edward R. Murrow School of Public Diplomacy: public diplomacy generally "deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies". It looks at aspects of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy. This includes: government cultivating public opinions abroad; interactions between private groups and their interests; communication on foreign affairs and the processes of inter-cultural contact. For more see: http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy.
3. For more on the establishment of China-South Africa bilateral relations see: Alden, C. 1997.Solving South Africa's Chinese puzzle: democratic foreign policy making and the "two Chinas" question. South African Journal of International Affairs, 5(2), 80-95; Naidu, S. 2008. Balancing a Strategic Partnership in Ampiah, K and Naidu, S (eds.): Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? : Africa and China, University of Kwazulu-Natal Press: Scottsville, 167-191.
4. For more detailed information on selected China media engagements (2000-2012), refer to the table in: Wu, Y. (2012).The Rise of China's State-Led Media Dynasty in Africa, SAIIA Occasional Paper, 117. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, pp. 13-15.

5. The soft power concept is not new to China: Confucianism (551–479 BC) opposed the enforcing of values on others; the founder of Mohism (470–390 BC), Mo Zi was against offensive force, and similarly, mind over force was the foundation of strategist Sun Tzu's Art of War.

6. For studies focussed on China telecommunications in Africa see: Sutherland, E. 'China in Africa – Issues in Telecommunications', University of Witwatersrand, LINK Centre, working paper series, 30 March 2014; Zao H. 'The Chinese telecommunications war in Africa', 7 March 2013, http://china-africa-reporting.co.za/2013/03/the-chinese-telecommunications-war-in-africa-2/; and Cissé D. 'Competition for development: chinese telecommunication companies in Africa'. Centre for Chinese Studies, Policy Briefing, April 2012,
http://www.ccs.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Telecom_Policy-Briefing_final.pdf.

7. More about Channel Africa:
http://www.channelafrica.co.za/sabc/home/channelafrica/aboutus.

8. One example is the Journalism Department (at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa) who has a China-Africa Reporting Project and selects a group of Chinese working journalists to attend their annual Power Reporting African Investigative Journalism Conference in Johannesburg organised in collaboration with the Forum for African Investigative Reporters. After the conference, the Chinese journalists are provided with logistical and financial support to report on a China-Africa issue in an African country of their choice with the resulting story published in Chinese media.

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